

Victorian Studies Association of Ontario



September 2006

1. [The President's Message](#)
2. [Introducing "The Forum"](#)
3. [Postcolonial and Transnational Thinking in Victorian Historical Studies](#)
4. [Everything Old is New Again: Pedagogy, Theory, and the 'New' Victorian Canon](#)
5. [Evening Lectures for Autumn 2006](#)
6. [Whither Performativity](#)
7. [Victorian Virtual Realities: 2007 VSAO/ACCUTE Panel Call for Papers](#)

The President's Message

Welcome to the start of a new year for the Victorian Studies Association of Ontario. During the summer, the executive worked on arranging events for the upcoming year, revising the website, and discussing possible new developments for the association and ways to acknowledge our long history and the value of our traditions.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of our association, a history of which we can all be proud. The occasion especially reflects the ongoing contributions by a number of members who have supported the VSAO for years and, in some cases, decades. The Executive would like to acknowledge this history at the spring conference. Any suggestions for ways in which we can do this would be much appreciated (denisoff@ryerson.ca).

Next year's conference will again take place on the last Saturday of April. The conference theme for 2007 and our two keynote speakers will be confirmed shortly. Also, following the huge success of the panel at the 2006 conference, we will soon be putting out a call for papers for a panel again this year. It will be mailed out electronically and posted on our website (www.ryerson.ca/vsao).

In addition to the conference, the VSAO is co-organizing a panel on "Victorian Virtual Realities" with the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English for the 2007 Congress in Saskatoon (see page 6 for details). Evening lectures are also being

organized, with this autumn seeing two events in Toronto and one in London. More information on these events can be found on page 4 of the newsletter.

I would like to close by thanking everybody who has contributed to the strength of the VSAO over the past year, and especially to those who have made a commitment to the organization for so many years.

All the best,
Dennis



"Bon Mot" - Aubrey Beardley

Introducing "The Forum"

With this newsletter, the VSAO is inaugurating what we hope will become a regular feature of our newsletter – the VSAO Forum.

With each newsletter, a group of scholars will be asked to contribute their thoughts on a particular issue of interest to Victorianists. For our first forum, we have chosen the topic of **"Thoughts on New Theories in Victorian Studies."** We would like to thank Susan Brown (University of Guelph), Leslie Howsam (University of Windsor), and Patricia Rigg (Acadia University) for accepting our invitation to offer their views on any aspect of the subject.

Postcolonial and Transnational Thinking in Victorian Historical Studies

For the past fifteen years, Victorian historical studies have been dominated by a new, critical way of thinking about the Empire and colonies. After decades of what might be called "little Englander" scholarship – which made a sharp distinction between "home" and "away," and separated metropolis from periphery – historians such as Antoinette Burton and Catherine Hall have taught us to complicate those boundaries. In Burton 's words, "the project of historicizing the institutions and cultural practices of British imperialism is crucial to understanding metropolitan society in the nineteenth century" ("Contesting" 368). Scholars and students are learning to ask questions about how the lives of British people – including working-class people who never left their home village to travel as far as Leeds or London – were implicated in Britain 's economic and other relationships with India . The evangelical project of missionary activity has been examined from the perspective of the missionized, and then again from that of the missionaries and their supporters. The literary and educational ambitions of London and Edinburgh publishers resulted in influential reading material for schoolchildren and their parents abroad, as well as rich profits for booksellers. Examples like these could be multiplied many times over, and indeed new books and articles are adding to their number every year.

In the beginning, this kind of thinking emerged in response to the school of “subaltern studies” and the journal of the same name, where scholars in south Asia began to question the focus, as well as the rhetoric and discourse, of top-down and metropole-out studies of Indian history. In response to this, as well as to new approaches in literary studies, historians turned to the material products of popular culture to examine imperial propaganda in such forms as theatre, children’s books, and school traditions. And they returned to the archives to scrutinize the scanty record – and the revealing silences – for evidence of imperial attitudes and colonizing values.

A related but separate development has been a series of conferences and publications on “the British World,” which have focused on the settler colonies of the Empire. They look at the Britishness of places such as Canada , Australia , and South Africa , and are particularly interested in how the imperial context affected relationships with aboriginal peoples.

In some ways these two approaches mirror the distinction made by J. R. Seeley in his 1883 book, *The Expansion of England* , where he concentrated on recovering the English-speaking world for Britain, devoting a separate chapter to colonies like India that were “bound to us only by the tie of conquest.” But Seeley never thought about the implications of white women’s contributions to the imperial enterprise, or guessed at how historians of Britain and the Empire would appropriate and deepen a rich vein of scholarship on race, class, gender, and national identity.

A few items for further reading:

Phillip Buckner and R. Douglas Francis, eds. *Rediscovering the British World* (Calgary : University of Calgary Press, 2005).

Antoinette Burton, “Contesting the Zenana: The Mission to make ‘Lady Doctors for India ,’ 1874-1885,” *Journal of British Studies* 35 (July 1996): 368-97.

_____, *At the Heart of the Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late Victorian Britain*(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2002)

John M. Mackenzie, *Propaganda and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984)

_____, *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986)

Leslie Howsam

Everything Old is New Again: Pedagogy, Theory, and the “New” Victorian Canon

The enormous ideological divide between the Victorian Literature course I took as an undergraduate student thirty years ago and the Victorian Studies course I routinely offer these days seems to me to represent an important shift in pedagogy. As my current course title suggests, I take a comprehensive view of Victorian writers, reading them with my students in historical, cultural, and theoretical contexts. Moreover, my course tends to reflect my research interests, so I emphasize gender and feminist theory as I consider ways in which the Woman Question appears as subtext in a significant number of Victorian works. The major anthologies available certainly reflect the dramatic expansion of the parameters of Victorian literature and culture. The most immediate consequence of this shift is coverage: the “new” Victorian course necessitates a corresponding pedagogical shift that redefines the well-educated student of Victorian literature who will become the “new” Victorian scholar.

The transformation of the Victorian poetry canon as a consequence of the relatively recent availability of works by Victorian women poets has been enormously beneficial to scholars, but it has also raised some important pedagogical issues. As a student, I used the Houghton Stange anthology and, in a full-year course, read primarily Tennyson, Browning and Arnold as the poets of the Age. Christina Rossetti is the only woman included in this anthology and, although I did not read Rossetti’s poetry as an undergraduate, I must admit that I left the course with more in-depth knowledge of those three Victorian giants than I can give my students. I finished the course convinced that Victorian poetry was generally produced by men, a view that I go to great lengths to dispel today. Nevertheless, I was well-prepared for graduate school, where I again read Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold. Truthfully, in graduate school in the 1980s I was introduced only in a cursory way to Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti, who I thought were remarkable exceptions to the patriarchal rule.

Once I began teaching Victorian studies in the 1990s, my perception of the period had been reshaped by my research, my theoretical background, and the availability of a wide range of work by women in the more commonly used anthologies. I also compile to compile co urse packs to give my full-year course added breadth. My students seem to be interested in and engaged by my “off-road” Victorian course: they come to me having some familiarity with literary theory, and they are prepared to enter into a wide-ranging discussion that arguably enriches the classroom experience for all of us. However, this experience comes at a cost, I think, evident in these students when they enter graduate school having had limited exposure to the poets and novelists that have conventionally defined Victorian literature.

The question, then, is the following: In sacrificing depth for breadth, am I expanding my students’ minds, giving them a more accurate sense of Victorian culture, and establishing in them a solid foundation for future work, or am I diffusing the material, robbing the students of meaningful encounters with the icons of the age, and releasing them into graduate schools with a sketchy knowledge of Victorian times and Victorian writers? My undergraduate students have been introduced to important Victorian women, and I certainly feel compelled to continue to contribute to the re-integration of women writers into the Victorian canon. I

feel compelled as well to discuss these writers with future Victorian scholars within theoretical contexts that reflect the ideological complexity of our world. However, the expanded canon and the multiple perspectives from which I view it leave relatively little time for Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold, and I sometimes wonder whether I and my graduate students are reading together what should be “old” material as “new” material and whether we are reading, therefore, at a level more suited to an undergraduate classroom.

This is obviously a question difficult to address—perhaps even impossible to address. One might argue that the undergraduate classroom is the place for breadth and that the graduate classroom the place for depth; however, the reality is that graduate students who have had little exposure to Tennyson, Browning, and Arnold are often unprepared to enter into discourse that assumes knowledge of the work fundamental to the period and are thus unable to position Victorian women poets within the broader discourse of Victorian poetry. Is it time for the pendulum to swing ever so slightly back?

Patricia Rigg

Evening Lectures for Autumn 2006

The VSAO's 2006-2007 season is shaping up to be as dynamic and informative as last year's. We are continuing our practice of holding lectures at various locations in Ontario. If any member of the association wishes to organize a VSAO evening lecture in their town or city for the 2007-2008 season, please don't hesitate to drop me a line.



28 September 2006— Toronto

An e-mail has already been sent out to VSAO members regarding this year's first evening lecture. At 7:30 p.m. on Thursday, September 28, **Gisela Argyle** will be speaking on “**From Female Life-Writing to Male Fiction: George Meredith's Tragic Comedians and Diana of the Crossways.**” Gisela's talk will take place in the Emmanuel College chapel, Victoria College, at the University of Toronto.

18 October 2006 — London

Corinne Davies and Christopher Keep have kindly organized a VSAO evening at the University of Western Ontario. The event will take place at 7:30 p.m. on Wednesday,

October 18, at the Great Hall, Huron University College . The speakers will be:

Ann Gagne, “Framing It with Her Hands: Touching George Egerton’s ‘Gone Under’”

Alexandra Kimball, “‘A Pandemonium of Posters’: Advertising Sensation in the New Journalism”

M. Daniel Martin, “The Pleasures of Imminent Disaster: Thrill Rides and British Imperialism from the Big Wheel to the London Eye”

21 November 2006— Toronto

As our last speaker for the autumn, we are delighted to have **Cecilia Morgan** from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Her topic is “**Imperial Culture and Victorian Spectacle: Canadian Tourists in Britain .**” The talk will take place at 7:00 p.m. on Tuesday, November 21, in the Senior Common Room of Burwash Hall, Victoria College, at the University of Toronto

Whither Performativity?

As one who embraced the concept of performativity in Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), I have of late been mulling it over. (The idea of course goes back to J. L. Austin’s speech act theory, and important earlier engagements include those by Shoshana Felman and Jacques Derrida, but its widespread impact on literary and cultural studies dates from Butler’s book.) The purchase of performativity on Victorian studies has been salutary and stimulating. It helped clinch the critique of essentialism while affirming from a post-structuralist position the utility of apparently essentialist behaviour, galvanizing feminist and queer studies. And despite the fact that performativity is often emphatically distinguished from formal performance, the performative turn also encompassed increased attention to the neglected areas of Victorian literary theatre and other modes of performance, high and low. Moreover, the larger preoccupation with performativity provided a welcoming context within which to make the case for the crucial importance of these areas of study. In positing a relationship between textuality and the (re)presentation of subjectivity, theories of performativity also helped valorize Victorian writing, particularly poetry, as socially interactive and politically engaged (Slinn 2003). Far from a new theory, it is a paradigmatic concept that is going strong in much Victorianist work.

Yet I find myself troubled by the relationship between performativity and performance. If all the world’s a stage, is the specificity of formal performativity in danger of occlusion? If the political lives of the earnest (and, yes, highly self-conscious) Victoria and the ironic Disraeli both fall readily under the performative rubric along with the theories of Ruskin, fiction by both Mary Braddon and Ellen Wood, the career of Charlotte Cushman, and the practices of pantomime, is the term too malleable or capacious? At what point does the concept become a rather loose metaphor, and what is at stake in that shift? Performativity as mobilized in

Victorian studies seems to be strained by issues of consciousness and location (in the speaker/text? in the audience/ context?) and by a vacillation between discursive determinism and naïve affirmations of agency. Such tensions, and the refusal to take refuge in neat binaries, are part of what gives the concept its power. But at the same time, it doesn't seem to have significantly moved us on from the "subversive yet contained" or "complicit yet resistant" moment at which it burst on the scene—performative subjects remain, paradoxically, over-determined agents.

And then there's materiality. Some of the most interesting aspects of Victorian performativity revolve around questions of the audience —whether it is a crowd witnessing a funeral, the space of theatrical events, a family partaking of a novel or poem read aloud, or pedestrians on Regent Street; these are aspects of Victorian life that are especially evanescent, hard to reconstruct, and accessible (if at all) almost entirely in terms of textuality. Performativity has made us more attentive to question of the body in relation to textuality, more desirous of grappling with it, but it still seems more of a tantalizing promise than a realized goal.

The signal work on performativity in Victorian studies attests to its pervasive explanatory power. But I wonder, as one whose thinking about the relations among subjectivity, textuality, and social processes was formed in its sway: what is not performative? what gaps or blindnesses need to be addressed by new theories in Victorian studies?

Susan Brown

2007 VSAO/ACCUTE Panel Call for Papers

"Victorian Virtual Realities"



It often seems that during the Victorian era one couldn't turn a corner without entering a new reality or at least somebody ready to describe recent travels into another realm. When Marie Corelli published her novel *A Romance of Two Worlds* in 1886, she appears not to have been surprised to find that many fans took seriously her depiction of ideal Christian love as extraterrestrial fulfilment via human electricity. She in fact had a collection of their letters appended to later editions of the novel as support for the feasibility of her vision.

Keenly encouraging interdisciplinary scholarship, this joint VSAO/ACCUTE panel of the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English at the 2007 Congress in Saskatoon invites papers that explore the cultural basis from which various virtual realities gained popularity – whether they were rooted in the mystical, scientific, aesthetic, technical, spiritual, or otherwise. The panel also

encourages proposals that address the ways in which recent work in virtual reality, hypermedia scholarship, and other aspects of the digital environment can assist scholars in gaining a more holistic sense of Victorian realities and the ways Victorians perceived their realities.

Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- * scientific proofs of invisible realities
- * the importance of the virtual in domestic and imperial politics
- * new visual technologies of the Victorian era
- * drugs, hallucinations, and alternative mental states
- * corporeality and shape-shifting
- * the impact of new modes of transportation on conceptions of space
- * performing class, gender, and race and re-inventing the self
- * developments in print culture and changing popular views of reality
- * digital role-playing and Victorian fantasies
- * hypermedia research tools and historical models of vision

Please send electronic copies of proposals (300-500 words), plus a 100-word abstract and brief biographical statement, to Dennis Denisoff (denisoff@ryerson.ca) by November 15, 2006. Alternatively, you may send hard copies by mail to Dennis Denisoff / Department of English / Ryerson University / 350 Victoria Street / Toronto , ON M5B 2K3.